Fuel your imagination
KM and the art of storytelling

Stories have been used for generations as a way to exchange and propagate complex ideas, but the association between storytelling and knowledge management has only recently attracted the widespread attention it warrants. Simon Lelic talks to representatives from SINTEF, Nasa, the World Bank and IBM, and discusses how the techniques can be used to ignite change and encourage collaboration in an organisational setting.

Storytelling has existed for thousands of years as a means of exchanging information and generating understanding. In an organisational setting, the use of story has grown as people from a wide range of professional backgrounds have come to realise its power, to the point now that storytelling has become a favoured technique among management scientists and consultants, many of whom nevertheless demonstrate only a limited comprehension of the discipline's true complexity. If storytelling is not to become just another fad, a broader understanding of the technique needs to be fostered, for there are a number of pitfalls the use of story presents. For knowledge management practitioners, however, these are offset by the enormous benefits storytelling offers as a simple but effective way of conveying complex ideas and of understanding the intricacies of culture and learning within communities.

Seth Weaver Kahan is senior information officer for the Internal Communications department of the World Bank. To him, storytelling is a way of putting a "human face" to an organisation. "When undertaken thoughtfully, storytelling brings people together in an environment where they can share what they care about in creative and personal ways," he says.

Similarly, Steve Denning, currently an independent consultant but formerly director of the World Bank's knowledge management programme and author of The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations [1], believes storytelling in an organisational context involves the creation of meaning for participants, and hence lies at the heart of the functioning of all organisations. "A narrative or story in its broadest sense is anything told or recounted. Narrative meaning is created by establishing that something is part of a whole and usually that something is the cause of something else. It is usually combined with human actions or events that affect human beings. The meaning of each event is produced by the part it plays in the whole episode," he says.

Storytelling thus presents itself to the KM practitioner as a powerful tool. Not only does the technique allow its participants, be they the subject, the audience or the teller of the story, to develop a sense of collective identity, as Denning says, it also offers a conduit for knowledge itself. Alexander Laufer is editor-in-chief of ASK Magazine , Nasa's online journal devoted to sharing knowledge in the organisation's project management community through the use of storytelling. According to Laufer, stories are a valuable tool for capturing knowledge. "Generating, sharing and discussing stories is an excellent way of converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge, and an effective method for quickly assimilating new learning," he says. And as Dave Snowden, director (EMEA) of IBM's Institute for

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Knowledge Management, suggests, stories can also serve as repositories of knowledge, and as a means of identifying links between people and their broader communities. "In fact, we are only just beginning to explore the potential of storytelling," he says. "There is considerable evidence that story will soon become the main tool in knowledge management programmes and decision making."

Snowden and Denning are acknowledged storytelling pioneers, and both are currently involved in a worldwide series of storytelling masterclasses, organised by Ark Group. And while storytelling has, as Denning says, been employed for years as a means of communication in many organisations, it is only recently that storytelling has been explicitly used as a management tool. The World Bank was one of the first institutions to do so, and The Springboard details the role so-called ˜springboard' stories played in launching the organisation's knowledge management programme. Likewise, IBM has lead the use of storytelling as a means of knowledge mapping, as Snowden says, while Kahan also points to Rick Stone of the StoryWork Institute as an early leader in the field.

More recently, the use of story in an organisational setting has grown exponentially, as Kahan suggests: "In the last four years, it has gone from an arcane subject discussed mainly by linguists and psychologists to a mainstream, albeit peripheral, topic." This assessment is supported by Theodor Barth, senior researcher at SINTEF Industrial Management, an association of institutes and shareholder companies that is divided into a not-for-profit research foundation and a cluster of commercial operations. According to Barth, stories are being used more frequently in the development of competencies in a broader range of learning situations ... from work-related operations to project-based and individual learning activities. This is despite an antagonism towards story, which Denning believes "reached a peak in the twentieth century with the determined effort to reduce all knowledge to analytic propositions, and ultimately physics and mathematics". Now, as Kahan says, storytelling is recognised as a legitimate field for exploration, and experiments in its use are ongoing in businesses around the world.

Mirroring the increased adoption of storytelling as a management technique, understanding as to the subtleties and complexities of the use of story has also developed. Breaking the technique down into its composite elements, Barth describes genre, media and purpose as the three central components of story. Genre is fairly self-explanatory, and while the options open to a storyteller are too numerous to list here, Snowden points to fable, myth, virus, archetypal and oral history as among the most common. Likewise, a story may be delivered through any medium (the web, role plays, comic strips, PowerPoint presentations, novellas ... the list goes on ... all have their place), although whichever is chosen will depend to a large extent on the purpose of the story, the third of Barth's categories. As previously mentioned, stories can be of value to an organisation in a number of ways, and Kahan lists what he considers the most common reasons organisations might turn to the use of story. For example, storytelling can be used to spark change (Denning's springboard stories, for instance), to enable people to build a sense of community and allow

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more effective collaboration, as a knowledge sharing activity or as a way of fostering a greater understanding of corporate culture.

As Denning points out, ultimate success with the use of story will also depend on the purpose the technique is being used for, although a common trap he highlights is not being clear at the outset as to the aim of the story, or losing sight of that purpose during the actual performance. Laufer describes in more general terms what he sees as the critical elements of a strong story: "Good stories make us want to know what happens next. They introduce conflict or a problem. The best ones build suspense and excitement as they go on, and very often use everyday, conversational language, the language you night use when talking to a friend." This is echoed by Snowden, who feels conflict and empathy are key to any story, regardless of its form. Similarly, Kahan believes that for story to be an effective tool for the unfolding of meaning within a group, the right context and relevance must be established up front.

If used effectively, storytelling offers numerous advantages over more traditional techniques. It is, as Snowden says, an intimate, revealing and, above all, simple way of conveying complex ideas. Ultimately, says Laufer, people love to read and hear stories. "Stroies are an excellent vehicle for learning," he argues. "But before learning can take place, there must be an interest. Abstract principles and impersonal procedures are not attractive. However, everyone likes a good story. Stories are capable of conveying a rich and clear message. They provide an example in a non-threatening manner. Moreover stories are memorable. The messages stemming from a particular experience tend to stick." And as Denning suggests, stories can transfer knowledge, embody tacit knowledge and nurture community in ways other forms of communication cannot. In short, he argues, it is not that storytelling works better: "In my experience, nothing else works at all."

Yet with such power there inevitably comes a disclaimer or two. "Storytelling is most counter-productive when the story told is not true," says Denning. "And when I say ˜true', I do not mean factually accurate, but rather authentically true. An example of a story that is factually accurate but lacking in authentic truth is: ˜Seven hundred happy passengers reached New York after the Titanic's maiden voyage.' When the truth that the ship sank and 1,500 passengers drowned comes out, the story becomes counter-productive. Yet many corporate communications take exactly this form: the story is factually accurate, but there is lurking below the surface some negative element that, when revealed, totally undermines the intended impact of the story." In a similar vein, Snowden warns that storytelling is often not as important as the narrative patterns a story may reveal. "A ˜Janet and John' story, for example, is an idealised account of good behaviour that produces only a cynical anti-story within the informal networks of an organisation," he says.[2] At ASK Magazine , according to Laufer, his team also avoids publishing ˜success stories' that are written more as public relations exercises than as a means to promote genuine learning, which lack credibility and would ultimately undermine the credibility of the magazine.

Assuming such pitfalls can be avoided, there is every reason to believe that storytelling will emerge as a key competence in a growing number of

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organisations. IBM's Institute of Knowledge Management is already deeply involved in research, funded by the US government, into how storytelling can be linked with the likes of complexity theory and scenario planning, with the ultimate goal of dramatically altering established decision-making capabilities and practices. The future success of storytelling, as Kahan says, will nevertheless depend a great deal on the fruits that spring from the current interest. Snowden and Denning are also both wary that the technique may simply become another management fad, which, in Denning's words, is "promoted by people who don't understand it, drowning in jargon-infested terminology, abstracted by narratologists into some kind of esoteric science and derided by those who do not know how to use it intelligently". But Laufer believes people are about ready for more personal forms of knowledge management, after having been inundated with impersonal, IT-based solutions for so long. If he is right, storytelling may soon have its day.

References
1. Denning, S. The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations (Butterworth Heinemann, 2000)
2. This topic is covered in more depth in Snowden's ˜Narrative patterns: The perils and possibilities of using story in organisations', Knowledge Management, Vol. 4.10, July/August 2001, available to subscribers in the Knowledge Management library. Visit: www.kmmagazine.com

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